



The White Roses of Mottisfont

David Stone

In 1972 when Graham Thomas began the task of designing and establishing his Garden of Old Roses within the ancient walled gardens of Mottisfont Abbey, pride of place within the wide and spacious borders was given the WHITE ROSE, *Rosa alba semi-plena*, and its close kinsman ALBA MAXIMA, the JACOBITE ROSE of days gone by. Some few years later he explained to me his reason for this. “Albas, Mr. Stone, are the ‘Elder Statesmen’ of the rose world. They grow with dignity and bestow this dignity on all those around them. They are the upholders of standards, especially at Midsummer when the more flamboyant of their companions are prone to riot!”

Celeste. All photos by Ron Robertson unless otherwise noted.



Abbey

Looking back on that conversation some thirty years later, I am still astounded by the understated brilliance of Graham's perception and understanding of his charges. For roses do have differing personalities, which display themselves not just in color and form of flower, but in habit of growth, in shade of leaf, in shape and size of silhouette, observed not just against the background of a summer's evening sunset but also against a midwinter skyline of steel grey and slate. To plan and plant a garden of roses then, requires a degree of knowledge and experience that reaches beyond the covers of the latest colored catalogue to a place where one can touch and grasp and engage with the very characters of the plants themselves. And that place can only be reached via the road of long experience. Hence the big Albas, salient throughout the garden, standing sentinel at border points, reassuringly upright, quietly complete, confident amid the chaos of midsummer. "We were numbered among the first," they seem to say, "and we will be found among the last."

The ancient White Roses of pre-history are among the most beautiful of all garden plants. Properly pruned, they present a majestic sight even in the chilly depths of midwinter. Strongly branched and broad of span, they provide solidity and strength within the border, complementing perfectly the more luxurious and overwhelming tendencies of their companions. The Albas in bloom provide peaks of pure white amid the rolling hills of pink, crimson and mauve, which are the ranges of the Gallica, the Bourbon, and the Moss. And in the sea-green depths of their foliage are held suggestions of shade, enticing in summer and ever welcome even on the coolest of days. Left to form fruit, *R. alba semi-plena* can be counted among the most ornamental of the hip-bearing roses, notable for the sheer extravagance and brilliance of its crop, which at

Mottisfont is beloved of the blackbirds, thrushes, and winter finches.

But what of the other Albas? How many hundreds may I choose from? The fact that over the long years of the Rose's evolution so few Albas have been raised to grace our gardens is a continuing source of surprise to me. Considering the qualities that the group as a whole has to offer, it is a puzzle that little attention seems to have been given them by the great breeders of the day. In consequence, relatively few varieties remain available to us today. But what the Albas may lack in quantity, they more than make up for in quality.

Two Albas hover near the top of my own list of the "Top Ten Best Garden Roses." What list could not include the beautiful MAIDEN'S BLUSH and exquisite CELESTE and still remain creditable? Both are stalwarts among roses, inheriting the



stature and vigor of their venerable forebears while possessing a greater grace of form that suggests a degree of femininity uniquely theirs. The leaden foliage and the piercingly sweet fragrance of the “Great White Rose” are also inherited and revealed to splendid effect, so much so that when in full bloom, it is impossible to pass either rose without pausing to appreciate their beauty. And to pause within a rose garden is to lose all sense of time.

Is there another rose more aptly named than MAIDEN’S BLUSH? From the first unfolding of those tightly packed petals to the final reflexion of the fully opened



LEFT: Celeste from *The Genus Rosa*. ABOVE: Mme. Legras de St. Germain.

bloom, she displays a purity of tone and color unequalled among the lighter roses. Even as the flower fades from warm blush-pink to softest flesh, the spell she casts remains intact. At Mottisfont, we grow her among the deeper-hued Gallicas, in which role she provides the perfect foil, counterbalancing the heady hues of purple, mauve, and crimson with the imposing modesty of the true maiden.

CELESTE is another delightful variety that ranks high among the great of the Family of the Rose. Graham would use the word “exquisite” when referring to CELESTE, holding that a single unfurling bloom was among the most beautiful sights of midsummer. She is surprisingly deep in color, being of a rich shade of pink that in its strength and stability is difficult to find, even among the Shrub roses of today. The foliage is a subtle blend of green and grey, a shade that seems designed to embrace and enhance the natural warmth of the blooms.

A lesser known but equally worthy Alba is CHLORIS, which first came to me from Sangerhausen in the 1980s and it immediately stole my heart! It has many of CELESTE’s attributes, including buds that in their shape and form are only marginally less beautiful, if indeed such beauty can be measured, and the laxer, more graceful habit that I find particularly attractive among the pink Albas. The bloom is very full and reflexes to show a button eye. There is, however, little hint of grey within the foliage, which is a uniform deep green. As an added bonus, the variety has very few prickles, a boon at pruning time.

Among the more compact growers are two varieties that would also vie strongly for a place in my personal Top Ten. KÖNIGIN VON DÄNEMARK is a rose of particular beauty, producing seasonal blooms of the purest deep pink that for per-



fection of form rank alongside *SOUVENIR DE LA MALMAISON* and *MME. HARDY*. The generously filled flowers reflex into perfect quarters, with the central petals packed and preened into the tightest of buttons. Unfortunately, the spent blooms rarely fall of their own accord and if they are not speedily removed, rapidly deteriorate into a russet-colored mess. *FÉLICITÉ PARMENTIER* is a modest grower, rarely exceeding one meter in Mottisfont's stony soil. Its flowers, which are of the softest blush pink fading almost to white with age, are the fullest of any within the Alba group. Again, the fragrance is sharp but not intense, while the remarkably pale green foliage betrays a degree of hybridization that takes the plant beyond the stock of pure Alba.



OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: Belle
Amour, Blanche de Belgique, Königin von Danemark,
Maiden's Blush.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: Félicité
Parmentier, Chloris, Jeanne d'Arc, Great Maiden's Blush,
Pompon Blanc Parfait.



The upright stems of POMPON BLANC PARFAIT require firm pruning in the dormant season if they are to remain well branched and bushy. Left unpruned, the plant rapidly becomes leggy, a defect that might otherwise detract from the genuine beauty of its soft white pom-pom blooms. It shares with FÉLICITÉ the paler foliage and yellowish stems of the hybrid Alba and, like her, is also prone to blackspot and may become defoliated in a bad year unless protected.

MME. LEGRAS DE ST. GERMAIN is an Alba variety that even to this day remains unaccountably neglected. I consider it to be one of the best white-flowered shrubs for the summer garden available to us today, quite on a par with MME HARDY and certainly superior to BOTZARIS, with which it is sometimes confused. While forming a strong shrub, stoutly branched and robust, she retains a degree of charm *and* gracefulness befitting a lady of such lineage. The purest white of all the Albas, enhanced by just a suggestion of lemon. Perfect!

BELLE AMOUR is another obvious hybrid that shows affinity to the group as a whole and so is included here. My plants form prickly shrubs sparsely clad with leathery foliage. Mature plants may achieve 2 meters in height and are therefore ideal for the rear of the border where their somewhat lanky stems can be hidden from view but their beautiful deep salmon blooms appreciated, if at a distance. Graham suspected the influence of the Rambler AYRSHIRE SPLENDENS in its development, which may account for its prickles, vigor, and scent, which is said to be reminiscent of myrrh.

Among other Albas included in the Mottisfont Collection, are JEANNE D'ARC, a variety that seems to have much in common with ALBA MAXIMA, and BLANCHE DE BELGIQUE, another MAXIMA look-alike that I am still assessing. Unfortunately, our recently acquired plants of BLUSH HIP proved, in bloom, to be the old Damask favourite CELSIANA, showing that crucial mistakes can still be made.

Over the years, my Albas have proved themselves to be thrifty growers, thriving in our generally poorish soil, and repaying firm stem and spur pruning with a mass of midsummer bloom. Apart from the blackspot already mentioned, the big Albas are sometimes prone to rust, through which they show their affinity to *R. canina*, the natural host of rose rust in the UK. But let not these trivial weaknesses deter you from planting and growing the White Roses, and, in so doing, taking your place amid the legion of gardeners who have loved and labored over such varieties as MAIDEN'S BLUSH and THE GREAT WHITE for many hundreds of years—to the benefit of us all and the lasting beauty of Creation.

DAVID STONE *has held the post of Head Gardener at the National Trust's Mottisfont Abbey since 1978 and his main area of responsibility is the rose garden.*